WAS BY HIMSELF

Strong Identity of the Great Novelist Thackeray.

STUDENT AND TRAVELER

Lawyer—Journalist—Painter—Early Life and Struggles — In America as a Lecturer.

(Review of one of the Professor Rolfe University Extension lectures at the High School, Honolulu, season of 1899.)

"Fiction in his hands was not simply a profession, like another, but a constant reflection of the whole surface of life; a repeated echo of its laughter and its complaint. . . . . With his whole wide world of fops and fools, of good women and brave men, of honest absurdities and cheery adventurers, he must survive with Shakespeare and Cervantes in the memory and affection of men."

It is not a sufficient account of Thackeray to call him a great novelist, or a keen satirist, or a humorist. He is all three combined, and something more. Among English writers he must be classed by himself, as one of the most penetrating of all observers and delineators of human life, and at the same time one of the greatest of literary artists.

The surroundings and experiences of his early years were varied, and exceptionally favorable to the acquisition of a wide knowledge of mankind. He was born in India (July 18, 1811), where he lived long enough to gain an insight into the life of the European residents there. Then he was taken to England. At the age of eleven he was placed in the famous Charterhouse School, in London (the Grey Friars of "Pendennis" and "The Newcomes"). He remained there six years, and then spent a year or more at Cambridge University, where he gained part of the material for "Pendennis." After leaving Cambridge he traveled on the continent and studied art. He soon returned to London and began reading law in the Temple. Within a year or so he was tempted into politics, and then into journalism. He invested a part of his small fortune in two newspapers, which failed. Then he began the serious study of painting, in Paris. But before long he was absorbed in journalism again, writing foreign correspondence, art criticism, reviews, ballads, and stories, for various newspapers and for *Fraser's Magazine*.

In 1836, when he was twenty-five, he married. He made his home in London, and supported his family by his pen. After a few years of great happiness his wife's health failed. Her disease soon developed into a sort of mild insanity. It became necessary for him to find a quiet home for her, and to send his daughters to his mother in Paris and return himself to his bachelor life. He never fully recovered from this blow.

His writing now began to gain in power. Within a few years he produced "Vanity Fair" (1847-8). At first it attracted but little attention. But gradually the public came to realize that it was a great book, and that Thackeray was one of the foremost writers of the time.

"Vanity Fair" was soon followed by "Pendennis" (1848-50). Then came the lectures on the English Humorists (1851). In these Thackeray described the literary life of the age of Queen Anne. It was natural for him to depict, in his next book, the whole life of that time, thus producing his great historical novel, "Henry Esmond" (1852). A few months after "Esmond's" publication he visited America, on a lecturing tour. This was so successful that three years later he came again. Between these two visits "The Newcomes" appeared (1853-5). In 1857 he attempted to enter Parliament, but was defeated. Soon after he became the first editor of the *Cornhill Magazine*, for which he wrote the charming "Roundabout Papers." He was now only a little over fifty. But sorrow and hard work had made him old before his time. His friends saw that his strength was failing, and none of them were greatly surprised at his sudden and comparatively early death, which occurred on the day before Christmas, 1863.

SUBJECTS FOR ESSAYS AND CLASS.

*[The object of these questions is to guide the students to certain clearly specified and limited portions of the writings under consideration, and to ensure his gaining a thorough acquaintance with and appreciation of both their content and their form. Each week there will be one question (marked with a *) which is intended for those, and those only, whose time and opportunities for preparation are limited. The subjects designated by the † are recommended to students who are especially interested in the theory and practice of literary art.*

Choose one subject and study it thoroughly. By all means write thoughtfully and concisely. If possible, rewrite the paper several times. Please quote in full, unless they are too long, all passages referred to in support or illustration of the statements made. After this task is completed turn to the other questions and consider carefully as many of them as time will permit, thus making preparation for the class discussion.]

*1. What is the moral effect upon you of reading Thackeray?

2. "He could not have painted Vanity Fair as he has, unless Eden had been shining brightly before his eyes." Examine "Vanity Fair" for proof of the truth or falsity of this statement.

†3. Analyze, as far as possible, the charm of Thackeray's style. Choose some favorite passage, and study carefully its æsthetic effect upon you and the causes thereof. (See the second extract under Illustrative Criticism.)

†4. Read question 4 under Lecture II, and then study in the way there indicated Becky Sharp in "Vanity Fair." Conclude by comparing and contrasting Thackeray's method of building up his characters before the reader's mind with Miss Austen's.

ADDITIONAL SUBJECTS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION.

1. Did Thackeray fail to appreciate women?

2. Was he a cynic? (Read the extract from Dr. John Brown, on page 22.)

3. Compare and contrast his novels with those of Dickens, in respect of subject, delineation of character, construction, style, and general value and interest.

READING.

Read first either "Vanity Fair" or "Pendennis." Both of these and "The Newcomes" and "Esmond" should be thoroughly familiar to every student of literature. Among the minor works the "Roundabout Papers," the "English Humorists," and the ballads and verses should be read first. It might be well to take these in alternation with the novels. Finally no admirer of Thackeray should fail to read the volume of letters that was published a few years ago. It is almost as interesting as one of the novels, and tells us a great deal about his inner life.—The best biography is the one published in the Great Writers Series. The sketch by Trollope, in the English Men of Letters Series, and the study by Dr. John Brown of Thackeray's literary career, in Houghton, Mifflin & Company's Modern Classics, are both excellent. There are pleasant reminiscences of Thackeray in Fields' "Yesterday with Authors."—Those who know Thackeray well will be interested in Taine's severe criticism of him (and incidentally of almost all English writers) in the fifth book of his "History of English Literature."

ILLUSTRATIVE CRITICISM.

Looking at Mr. Thackeray's writings as a whole, he would be more truthfully described as a sentimentalist than as a cynic. Even when the necessities of his story compel him to draw bad characters, he gives them as much good as he can. We do not remember in his novels any utterly unredeemed scoundrel except Sir Francis Clavering. Even Lord Steyne has something like genuine sympathy with Major Pendennis's grief at the illness of his nephew. And if reproof is the main burden of his discourse, we must remember that to reprove, not to praise, is the business of the preacher. Still further, if his reproof appears sometimes unduly severe, we must remember that such severity may spring from a belief that better things are possible. Here lies the secret of Thackeray's seeming bitterness. His nature was, in the words of the critic in *Le Temps*, "furieuse d'avoir été desappointée." He condemns sternly men as they often are, because he had a high ideal of what they might be. The feeling of this contrast runs through all his writings. "He could not have painted Vanity Fair as he has, unless Eden had been shining brightly before his eyes." The whole tendency of his writings, from the first to the last line he penned during a long and active literary life, has invariably been to inspire reverence for manliness and purity and truth. He is the healthiest of writers. In his pages we find no false stimulus, no pernicious ideals, no vulgar aims. We are led to look at things as they really are, and to rest satisfied with our place among them. Each man learns that he can do much if he preserves moderation; that if he goes beyond his proper sphere he is good for nothing. He teaches us to find a fitting field for action in our peculiar studies or business, to reap lasting happiness in the affections which are common to all. Our vague longings are quieted; our foolish ambitions checked; we are soothed into contentment with obscurity,—encouraged in an honest determination to do our duty.—*From Dr. John Brown's essay on "Thackeray's Literary Career."*

You, above all others, were and remain without a rival in your many-sided excellence, and praise of you strikes at none of those who have survived your day. The increase of time only mellows your renown, and each year that passes and brings you no successor does but sharpen the keenness of our sense of loss. In what other novelist, since Scott was worn down by the burden of a forlorn endeavor, and died for honor's sake, has the world found so many of the fairest gifts combined? If we may not call you a poet (for the first of English writers of light verse did not seek that crown), and so sane? . . . . That the creator of Colonel Newcome and of Henry Esmond was a snarling cynic; that he who designed Rachel Esmond could not draw a good woman: these are the chief charges that your admirers have to contend against. A French critic, M. Taine, also protests that you do preach too much. Did any author but yourself so frequently break the thread (seldom a strong thread) of his plot to converse with his reader and moralize his tale, we also might be offended. But who that loves Montaigne and Pascal, who that likes the wise trifling of the one and can bear with the melancholy of the other, but prefers your preaching to another's playing!

Your thoughts come in, like the intervention of the Greek Chorus, as an ornament and source of fresh delight. Like the songs of the Chorus, they bid us pause a moment over the wider laws and actions of human fate and human life, and we turn from your persons to yourself, and again from yourself to your persons, as from the odes of Sophocles or Aristophanes to the action of their characters on the stage. Nor, to my taste, does the mere music and melancholy dignity of your style in these passages of meditation fall far below the highest efforts of poetry.

Whenever you speak of yourself, and speak in earnest, how magical, how rare, how lonely in our literature, is the beauty of your sentences! Surely that style, so fresh, so rich, so full of surprises—that style which stamps as classical your fragments of slang, and perpetually astonishes and delights—would alone give immortality to an author, even had he little to say.—*From the letter to Thackeray, in Lang's "Letters to Dead Authors."*